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NFL Players Association files for decertification after NFL refuses to hand over financial records

BY GARY MYERS
DAILY NEWS SPORTS WRITER
Friday March 11, 2011

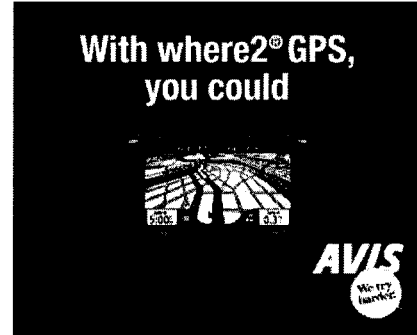
The NFL's 24 years of labor peace came to an end Friday when the union decertified, setting the stage for the league to lock out the players and a major court battle that could threaten the 2011 season.

Ultimately, the owners and players couldn't figure out a way to divide the \$9 billion in annual revenue the business of football produces. Now the league's immediate future will be decided in the courtroom. At 4:45 p.m., NFL Players Association chief DeMaurice Smith said he gave the owners until 5 p.m. to agree to produce 10 years of audited financial records in exchange for an extension of talks, which the NFL refused to do.

The union is expected to file an injunction to prevent the league from locking out the players. By decertifying, the union gives up its bargaining rights and will look to get a deal through the court system. They used this process in 1989, two years after the failed 1987 strike, which led to the free agency-salary cap system in 1993. The league will likely challenge the decertification by trying to prove it as a sham designed strictly to gain negotiating leverage.

If the injunction is granted, the new league year would start likely with free agency rules the same as last year - no salary cap and unrestricted free agency beginning after six years of service. That will severely deplete the field. If a new deal had been reached and the years of service for unrestricted free agency had gone back to four years, 495 players were expected to hit the market. The NFL will likely appeal any injunction, but these proceedings can take months.

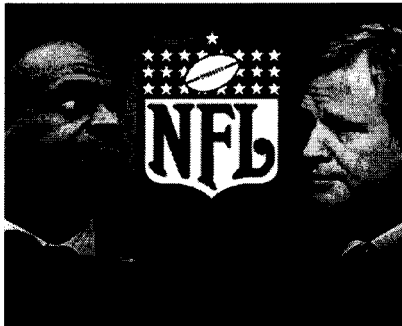
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DeMaurice Smith (L) and the NFL players will now look to the court system... (DAILY NEWS STAFF)

There wasn't much optimism going into Friday's meetings, the 16th session with federal mediator George Cohen in Washington. A large group of players and nine of the owners from the league's labor committee were in the meeting.

After the rhetoric heated up Thursday night when NFL lead negotiator Jeff Pash questioned the union commitment to the negotiating process and NFLPA executive director DeMaurice Smith took exception to it, there wasn't much optimism that anything positive would happen before the deal was due to expire Friday night at 11:59.

The owners came up with a new proposal, but it wasn't enough to keep these talks alive.

Earlier Friday, Saints quarterback Drew Brees, one of the faces of the league, took to his Twitter account to present the players case.

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